Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic: Prodigy Math
By Yu May

[Note: this story is a request for Katie the Gamer Girl. Based on characters and events in *Prodigy Math Game*. Content warning: this story depicts a brief scene of corporal punishment.]

Mathematics. It is the divine language of the universe. And on the Prodigy Isles, mathematics had also become the language of magic. In ancient times, the magic of the five classical elements (fire, plant, storm, ice, and water) had been woven into the land itself, but over many centuries the scholars of the Academy had formalized the rules of magic into an orderly system, using the very mathematical formulas that guided the magical world as their incantations.

It was not just any academy. It had always been known as “the Academy,” the first and only of its kind.

Today, Noot the fairy was flittering about the entrance hall, preparing to welcome the new class of first graders. This year, only nine children of age, across the entire island, had demonstrated the capacity to control magic. As he dusted the five Warden Keystones for the 11th time that day (Noot always preferred to clean in prime numbers), Noot muttered to himself. “Everything has to be perfect!”

Noot examined his work, before shaking his head so hard, his blue cap nearly flew off. “That won’t do! Guess I’ll just have to dust them two more times. 13 seems like a lucky number.”

Flapping his wings like a hummingbird, Noot dove to find a fresh feather duster, only to smack into another fairy, Gale the Academy Keeper. Like Noot, Gale had wings and wore the star symbol that represented astral magic. Unlike Noot, Gale was an Ivory fairy, with cool grey skin and white hair, which he mussed as he rubbed his aching skull. “Noot! Do be careful! The Warden Keystones may be indestructible, but I’d prefer you not knock them over. They could crack the marble floor!”

Noot blushed as he fixed his cap. “Sorry, Gale. I just don’t want to disappoint the first years.”

“Have you ever once seen a new student look disappointed when they first entered the Academy?”

Noot waved his arms, gesturing to the floating Guiding Hands he’d placed all around the Academy. Some of the hands held maps and arrows directing lost students to various classrooms, while others warned against touching or climbing on dangerous objects. “Well, no, but now that I’m responsible for first-year orientation, I can’t be too careful. What if one of them blows themselves up on their first day? It’d be all my fault!”

Gale sighed. “Everything will be fine, because you’ve already prepared for this day…how many rehearsals have we had so far? Seventeen? Nineteen?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Then you’re prepared. What could possibly go wrong?”

And seemingly, nothing did. The first year students arrived, right on schedule, and Noot guided them through using basic arithmetic for self-defense magic without a hitch. Sure, one of the students accidentally lit Noot’s scarecrow on fire during target practice, but after putting out the flames, Noot had introduced the students, five boys and four girls, to their new Starter Pets.

“These are the Academy’s starter pets. Every student of the Academy has one!” explained Noot. A girl squealed with delight as a Snowfluff nuzzled against her leg, while one of the boys started to wrassle with a playful Charfoal.

Noot waved a finger, matter-of-factly. “Don’t worry! They love to play-fight. It’s how they bond with you, and with other pets. Just don’t be too…rough?” But before Noot could finish, the children and pets began to play at combat on their own. A bat-like Wott landed on a girl’s head, sending her hair shooting up in every direction with static electricity. A Sproot sprang from child to child like a cat, before a boy caught it lightly and let it nestle on his shoulder and nibble his finger like a parrot. A particularly shy little girl approached a fish-like Mermina, looking nervously at its three horns. The Mermina heatbutted her gently, before letting her pat its head.

Since the time of the Ancient, aspiring mathematician-magicians had raised magical animal companions to hone their understanding of the basic elements of magic, recording their findings in magical tomes, commonly called Pet Books.

After the aspiring magicians inscribed the names of their new companions in their books, the pets disappeared in a flash of light, reappearing on the pages of the books as illustrations, awaiting the moment they would be called forth.

Noot exhaled with relief, for what felt like the first time in weeks. “Whew! We *made it!* Well, it’s time for you to get to class.”

A tremor rumbled through the floor of the entrance hall with such force, it sent the shutters on the windows rattling. Dust tumbled from the wooden rafters above. “Did you feel that?”

Noot had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. It somehow reminded him of that one time he’d stayed up past midnight watching some scary movie about wars in outer space. “I…can sense something. A presence I’ve not felt since…”

Flying through the high double doors that led to the grand central chamber, Noot caught sight of the Headmistress of the Academy, surrounded by the entire faculty and a group of distinguished alumni, before he flew towards them. “Headmistresss? What’s going on? Is it an earthquake?”

But Noot bounced off what felt like a wall of glass and landed on his rump. Rubbing his throbbing skull with one hand, and his aching tailbone with the other hand, Noot realized that all the teachers of the Academy were standing as still as statues. “A stasis spell? But that’s expert level magic. Who could be–”

A black lightning bolt shot through the ceiling landing on the decorative display that held the five Warden Keystones. Noot shielded his eyes against what he thought was blinding light, as bright as the sun, before realizing it wasn’t light at all. It was the utter absence of light. His ears ringing, Noot groaned. “What *was* that?! Woah…I don’t feel so good…And where did the Warden Keystones go?!”

“Mister Noot? What’s going on?” cried one of the girls, as the incoming first-grade class charged into the room.

Noot heard Gale’s voice calling from above him. “Noot? Quick, get the first years out of here, before–”

Noot caught a glimpse of Gale whipping open his magical tome, before something struck him in the chest, knocking the book out of his hands. But the book didn’t fall to the floor. It froze in mid-air, a few feet below Gale, a look of terror etched on his face.

A ringing, maniacal laugh echoed through the ornate chamber. Noot felt a chill as he recognized the unmistakable grating, bullying quality of the laughter. It was the Puppet Master, once the Academy’s most infamous bully, and following his expulsion, the Academy’s most notorious drop-out.

With a theatrical flourish, the Puppet Master flew over the heads of the faculty and staff of the Academy, his purple robes billowing, landing at the bottom of the grand staircase and slamming the butt-end of his jeweled staff against the marble floor with a sharp crack. Before him, he held a control bar, a wooden cross used by puppeteers to manipulate their puppets. Unlike an ordinary control bar, his floated in mid-air as though held aloft by invisible strings. Though the dark wizard’s face was obscured in shadow under his voluminous wizard hat, his white eyes shone with menace. “It’s finally done! With the Warden Keystones destroyed, no one will *ever* be able to enter the Academy and fill their minds with knowledge. And without knowledge, they will not be able to resist our mind illusions!”

Noot looked back and forth from the foe before him to the group of helpless children behind him. “Oh no! It’s the Puppet Master! This *is not* good!”

There was a dense clunk. One of the Puppet Master’s minions had attempted to follow him, only to bump his head against one of the immovable arms of the teachers, now frozen in time.

The Puppet Master screeched like a toddler. “Pippet! Get down here and help me deliver this ingenious, evil monologue!”

“Coming, Master!” wailed Pippet, his Jester hat flopping madly as he stumbled, then tumbled, down the stairs. Noot had just enough time to realize that Pippet was not a person, but rather an enchanted wooden puppet, before the Puppet Master scooped Pippet up and bent him over his knee, bottoms up. As the Puppet Master landed his palm against Pippet’s behind, each slap produced a dense, echoing klonk.

Pippet might not have been a real boy, but he howled as loudly as any real boy could as the Puppet Master spanked his wooden backside. “Yow! What did I do, Master, what did I do?”

Fuming, the Puppet Master continued delivering spanks at a brisk pace of three swats per second. “Do? You missed your cue, sawdust for brains! How many times did we rehearse this?”

Pippet struggled to answer between the rapid flurry of spanks. “Ow! Ouch! Um…Owwie! T-twenty–Yow! Twenty-nine t-times, M-Master? Yeeowch!”

“I told you to practice it at least *thirty-one* times, you blockhead!” After landing two especially hard claps to emphasize the prime number 31, the Puppet Master slowed the speed of the punishment to emphasize each and every word of his next sentence with a solid smack.

“I! Didn’t! Give! You! Life! With! My! Magnificent! Shadow! Magic! Just! So! You! Could! Sit! Around! Like! A! Bump! On! A! Log!”

Pippet roared, his free-floating wooden hands and feet kicking (and floating) freely, unable to protect his puppet patootie. “Baw! I’m s-so s-sorry, M-Master! Awoo! I’ll d-do–Oooooh! Buh-b-better! Boo hoo! Oooo-hooch! I-I puh-puh-promise–Oh!”

The Puppet Master’s hand froze in mid-air. “You puh-puh-promise, eh? And do you, puh-puh-promise not to sit around like a bump on a log when we get home?”

Pippet shook his head furiously, tears staining his painted wooden cheeks. “Nuh-nuh-no, muh-muh-Master! Sniff! I won’t s-sit around like a b-bump on a log ever again!”

The Puppet Master hemmed and hawed as he considered Pippet’s pleas, patting the puppet gently across his backside. “Hmm…I believe that’s a promise you can keep, Pippet, and do you know why?”

Pippet’s eyes widened with admiration. “Because I’m a good, evil apprentice?”

WHAP!

As the next slap caught him off guard, Pippet’s eyes remained wide, though his pupils contracted to pin points.

Looking quite pleased with himself, the Puppet Master resumed spanking his loyal servant. “No, Pippet, because as soon as I get you home, I’m going to spank you again. Then spank you again, tomorrow, and yet again, the day after. You won’t be able to do *any* sitting of *any* kind for a fortnight, you moron of a marionette!”

“Wuh? What’s a fortnight?”

“Two weeks, of course!”

Pippet desperately wanted to know how many spankings he was going to get, but unfortunately he had never practiced his multiplication tables, and even if he had, it’s not easy to multiply 7 times 2 when you’re getting spanked. “P-please, have mercy, Master! I can recite my lines, just like we practiced! I’ll make you proud!”

The Puppet Master sighed, before setting Pippet back on his feet. “Oh, I doubt that, but I suppose the show must go on. Do it right, this time!”

Pippet nodded as he bobbed up and down, rubbing his bottom furiously, before getting a splinter. With a fresh cry of pain, he temporarily forgot his backside, and quickly plucked out the splinter with his shadow magic. Finally, he pulled out index cards and read his lines, struggling to pronounce the Puppet Master’s purple prose. “Ahem! The less you learn, the stronger our mind illusions get! Let’s see what you know. [Pippet attacks the meddlesome kids.]”

The index cards scattered to the winds as the Puppet Master grabbed Pippet by the waist and put the poor puppet right back into the spanking position. “Don’t read that part, knot-head! Don’t you see the brackets? Those are the stage directions, not my brilliant dialogue!”

Pippet hissed, but couldn’t resist the temptation to sass back. “Yee-hee! I duh-dunno, your dialogue seems pretty *wooden* to me!”

The Puppet Master’s eyes narrowed before he held his hand aloft. With a flourish, his wizard staff and control bar transformed into a mean-looking wooden ruler. “Oh, you asked for it, now you will feel the full wrath of the Puppet Mast–”

A beam of astral light slammed into the Puppet Master’s face with such force, it sent him flying back into the staircase. Pippet floated in mid-air, awaiting the next spank, before he opened his eyes, realized he was disobeying the laws of gravity, and flopped to the floor.

Noot gasped for air as the astral star on his cap shimmered with residual light from his attack. “Quick children! Get out of here! I’ll hold him–”

In the instant Noot took his eyes of the Puppet Master, the dark wizard arose and returned fire with shadow magic, his wooden ruler returning to its original form as a staff. Noot closed his

eyes and concentrated on the mathematical equation for the speed of light that activated his astral magic: “C = 299,792,458 m/s!”

At Noot’s command, the first-year students ran to the exits. One of the boys hesitated at the door, summoning his Charfoal to his side from his book, before one of the girls grabbed him by the sleeve, her Mermina appearing behind her. “No, you heard Mr. Noot! We’d only get in the way!”

Seething, the Puppet Master rounded on Pippet, while casually firing a barrage of spells at Noot with one hand. “See what you did, Pippet? You distracted me in the middle of a fight! That’s going to earn you *another* spanking, as soon as we get home.”

Pippet pouted as he picked himself up. “Huh? Buh-buh-but–”

The Puppet Master waved a finger as he blasted ten arrows of black magic at Noot with a single motion of his arm. “No buh-buh-buts! The only buh-buh-butt I want to hear is the sound of your buh-buh-butt getting buh-buh-blistered with my buh-buh-belt! Or do I need to give you another lesson on the powers of ten?”

Pippet stiffened. He wasn’t quite sure what the powers of ten were, but the last time he’d asked the Puppet Master about mathematics-based magic, the Puppet Master had demonstrated by giving him ten swats, then one hundred swats, then one thousand swats. Pippet had decided to stop asking about integer powers after that unpleasant experience.

As Noot blocked the last of the ten shadow missiles, his knees buckled, his legs and arms trembling from the exertion. Then, he saw one hundred shadowy needles materialize above the Puppet Master’s head. Pressing his hands against the star on his cap, Noot felt it burn hot as he recited, “Ten times ten is one hundred!”

As one hundred rays of light burst forth and caught the shadow needles, Noot felt the last of his magic flicker and die. In terror, Noot realized that the Puppet Master wasn’t even bothering to recite mathematical incantations. His mind racing, Noot tried the ancient, secret technique of the Academy: *“Just say anything and stall for time!™”*

Noot yelled, “With the help of the power of the Wardens, we’re going to put a stop to the Order’s evil plans, once and for all!”

Sure, it was corny, but it was the best Noot could come up with, and it almost worked. For a moment, the Puppet Master paused his onslaught. Then, he twisted his staff, and a thousand shadow arrows appeared above his head, all pointed at Noot.

Noot had just enough time to chant, “Ten times one hundred is one thousand,” before the first shadow needle struck him. His astral symbol flared to life one final time, blocking most of the

barrage, before it shattered. Noot felt at least 40 sharp, wasp-like stings all over his body, before he was thrown back like a rag doll. His vision hazy, Noot struggled to remain conscious.

Lifting his head, Noot could barely make out the Puppet Master, slowly gliding toward him. “Bold words. Unfortunately for you, the shadow blast that destroyed the Warden Keystones also drained the power from the Six Wardens themselves. Now nothing stands in our way.”

Noot felt the last spark of magic from his cap flicker and die away. He had failed. Once the Pupper Master was through with him, there would be no one left to protect the children.

Then, Pippet pressed a finger against his mouth, pointing toward the empty display that once held the five Keystones. “Six Wardens? Uh, Master, there were only five in there…”

The Puppet Master froze, before his head spun around like a swivel. “Are…you…kidding me?! *How did we miss one?!”*

Shining tears appeared in the dark wizard’s glowing eyes. “*Come on!* How is this even possible?”

Pippet placed a reassuring hand on his master’s back. “Well, I suppose our intelligence could be lacking?”

The Puppet Master’s head shot up. “Of course! That’s the answer! This is all your fault, Pippet!”

Quick as you please, and Bob’s your uncle, and Pippet was back over the Puppet Master’s knee. “Ow-ow-ow! Huh? How is this my fault? Owwie!”

“You were responsible for gathering intelligence on the Academy’s student orientation ceremony, so clearly *your* intelligence was lacking! Oooooh! That does it! I’m giving you 10 to the power of 3 spanks, every day, for a month!”

“Yikes! H-how many is that? Yipe!”

“You figure it out!”

As he overheard the sound of Pippet’s spanking building to a crescendo, Noot twisted his head, and spotted one of the first years waving to him from behind the crack between the two great double doors. Noot tried to catch his breath, planning to yell something dramatic heroic like, “Run away! Save yourselves!” before realizing that would only alert the Puppet Master to the children’s presence.

With every ounce of strength he had left, Noot rolled on to his stomach, and used his wings to flutter to the door. The last thing Noot heard was Pippet wailing for mercy, before one of the kids shut the door behind him. Noot groaned. “I think it’s time for us to get outta’ here…”

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Outside the Academy, the concerned people of Lamplight Town had gathered at the sound of the emergency alarm. Noot shivered as he hopped off the back of the Snowfluff that had carried him to safety. At first, he thought he was only shivering from the cold touch of the Snowfluff's icy fur, but now, Noot realized it was also from fear. "This is a disaster! It's all my fault, if only I'd been more prepared–"

Before Noot could heap more scorn on himself, he felt 9 children competing to pull him into a group hug. "You did it, Mister Noot! You saved us!" cheered the girl who owned the Snowfluff.

Noot blinked as he felt his face being kissed from multiple directions. "Huh? But I was completely helpless against the Puppet Master. He creamed me!"

"You stalled him long enough to let us get away!"

"Yeah, and your guiding hands showed us where to find the nearest emergency exit!"

"And you taught us how to use our pets to help save you!"

"What do we do now, Mr. Noot? Look at the Academy. It's like it's trapped in a giant bubble!"

Squinting, Noot glanced up, and sure enough, a silvery dome encased the entire castle. "It must be Gale's emergency defense mechanisms. It must have activated when the Puppet Master attacked the Warden Keystones. That bubble will keep any magical attacks at bay, even shadow magic."

The girl with the Watt on her head raised her hand, her hair still standing on end from static electricity. "So, does that mean the Academy is safe? Is the Puppet Master trapped?"

Noot shook his head. "Unfortunately, no. Gale's defensive magic will protect the Academy and the teachers from harm, but it can't hold an expert-level magician for long. We'll have to get far away from here. I have friends in the Firefly Forest who could help us."

The boy with the Sproot on his shoulder huffed. "Help us do what? The Puppet Master destroyed the Warden Keystones. Without them, the Elemental Wardens are powerless!"

Noot grinned slyly. "I have a little secret I was keeping from the Puppet Master: the Warden Keystones can't be destroyed! All that blast did was scatter them around the island! Once we collect them all, we should be able to beat the Puppet Master."

"We?" asked the boy with the Charfoal.

“You’re bringing us on a big adventure?” squeaked the shy girl with the Mermina.

Noot nodded, before pulling out a record book that commemorated every student who had ever entered the Academy. “Of course! It’d be irresponsible of me to leave you kids alone. Plus, you’re all officially students of the Academy. I have to ensure you keep up on your math homework! In fact, I think you’ve all earned your wizard name. What shall you be known as?”

“But I thought we only earned our wizard name after our first year as students at the Academy?” asked the boy with the Sproot.

“Traditionally, yes, but as the guiding fairy of the Academy, I have two central duties: to welcome all new students to the Academy, and to grant you your wizard names, when I know you’ve proven yourselves ready for the responsibility. You may still be wizards-in-training, but starting today, you’re all officially wizards!”

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The Puppet Master harrumphed as he delivered the one thousandth spank. Then he paused to pull out his paint kit, and began applying a thin coat of red paint to Pippet’s wooden bottom. “Math! Math! Math! I’m sick of math! All I want is to destroy all mathematically-based magical knowledge, turn everyone into my shadow puppets, and never have to think about math ever again. Is that too much to ask? If I don’t like dealing with something, that means it shouldn’t exist! So why do I have to deal with incompetent help?”

Pippet rubbed his feet together as he felt the Puppet Master paint the shapes of two red handprints across his backside, perfecting the illusion that the punishment had left a lasting impression, just as intended. “Aaaah-ha! Master? Haven’t I been punished enough for one day?”

The Puppet Master shook his head as he daintily washed his brush and put away his paint set. “Of course not! You’ve still got a spanking coming as soon as we get home, but if you can handle these meddlesome kids, then I suppose I can let you off with only–”

The Puppet Master looked up to find the meddlesome kids, only to find they had disappeared. “Pippet, you fool! You let them get away! What am I going to do with you?”

Pippet hung his head. “Are you going to spank me again?”

The Puppet Master examined his work, but at the sight of poor Pippet’s bright red rear end, he had to admit his paint job was perfect. “Oh, I can’t stay mad at you, Pippet. C’mon, son, up you get…Of course, I *am* going to spank you again as soon as we get home, but I suppose there isn’t much harm in you letting a few first year students escape. In fact, I’m entrusting you with a special assignment.”

Pippet beamed at being called “Son,” by the Puppet Master. All he wanted in life was to be a real, evil boy, and destroy all math, along with the man who had given him life and taught him everything he knew about shadow magic. “A new job? Just for me? What do you want me to do, Poppa Master? …Uh, I mean, *Puppet* Master?”

“Simple! I’m putting you in charge of hunting down those first-year students, and their little fairy too! Every day, I want you to give me a report on your progress.”

Pippet saluted. “Aye aye, Master! You can count on me!”

“And do you know what happens if you haven’t got any good news to report?”

Humming, Pippet paused to contemplate this question.

The Puppet Master waited three seconds for Pippet to answer. Then six seconds. Then nine seconds. Then he sighed. “If you don’t capture those kids, you get spanked, Pippet.”

Pippet glanced nervously at the two, bright red handprints on his backside, the fresh paint still glistening, before clearing his throat. “You got it, Master! If I can’t handle a few snot-nosed first years, I deserve to get spanked! …Um, hypothetically speaking, if I don’t capture them, how many spanks do I deserve, precisely?”

“Well, there’s nine of them, and one fairy, so let’s say one swat per target you fail to capture, per day.”

Pippet pretended to yawn, before polishing one of his jester-hat bells against his collar. “Only ten swats? That’s nothing! I think I can handle that.”

The Puppet Master shrugged. “In that case, I’ll just multiply the number of spanks by two, every day.”

Pippet blew a raspberry. “Humph! That doesn’t sound like it would escalate quickly! I’m on it, Master! Let the hunt begin!”

With that, Pippet charged toward the doors, happy that he didn’t have to bother his head about useless junk like math. As long as he obeyed his Precious Puppet Master, everything would turn out just fine!

The Puppet Master shook his head, as he pulled out a coffee thermos with the words: “World’s Number 1÷0 Boss” printed across it and took a sip. He wasn’t worried. After all, it wasn’t like a group of first-graders would ever be able to thwart his ingenious plans for world domination. “Sigh, whatever am I going to do with the lad? He’s such a well-meaning blockhead…Oh well! Guess I’ll just have to spank some sense into him!”

The End